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Capoeira: Its Origins, History, and Background.

Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian martial art that combines dance, self-defense, and acrobatics with music. Just like many other worldly forms of martial art, Capoeira has a rich history and development rooted deep within Brazilian culture, stemming and beginning with the decedents of earlier years. The history of Capoeira draws its lineage from an art invented by African slaves who were forced to cleverly conceal their artful fighting from their Portuguese captors by masking the moves as dance steps.

With the emergence of the dark and middle ages, Portugal faced a radical decrease in its labor force and population in general. This was a result of human loss in wars, combined with a series of viral and life-terminating epidemics which spread to devastating proportions of society. A long with this, there was a huge deployment of people to Africa and India in Portugal's colonial endeavors, which intensified the crisis.

By the early 1500s, Portugal had begun extensive human trafficking from Africa to their South American colony named Brazil through a system known as the “middle passage.”

From 1500 and 1888, almost four million potential slaves crossed the Atlantic in the disease-ridden Portuguese slave ships. Although the Queiroz Law prohibiting slave traffic was signed in 1850, it was not enough to divert the travel and trade of the tumbadoras (slave ships) crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Many Africans were still forced to travel in ships along the "middle passage" and were then smuggled into Brazil illegally. This in turn began to shape the people and the culture of Brazil. From these Africans, Brazil inherited the essential elements of Capoeira. This development is evident when analyzing the movement and musical structure of Capoeira.

Capoeira was the effect of strife experienced by African slaves in Brazil. This is how they responded to their oppression; Capoeira became their emotional outlet experienced. Through the study of Capoeira, one can see the struggle of enslaved peoples of colonial Brazil. Experiencing a struggle for freedom, African slaves migrated to Bahia (a Brazilian state), where they developed this clever camouflaged and masked form of self-defense. This method of fighting intertwined with dance cloaked the slaves' despair and plotted rebellion from their masters. Both playful and graceful, the dancing and acrobatic movements can be easily transformed into aggressive attacks and defenses. Using the feet and legs for attacking and defending, these skillful moves also use the arms and upper body to hoist the Capoeirista into the air. The arms and shoulders were used to hold the stance of a particular fighter and were also used to provide balance and style. During training the slaves used very little contact. Singing, handclaps, and music were added to make the combat appear more playful and

dance-like in nature. “For the slaves it was a fight for liberation, but the masters simply saw it as a great way of being entertained.”

Finally, in 1888, slavery was abolished in Brazil. Soon after, Capoeira was banned by the government. Consequently, the practice of Capoeira became punishable by law. Imprisonment and deportation were the punishments. In addition, other manifestations of the Afro-Brazilian identity: samba, afoxé, candomblé, etc. were also banned. After a long escape from the societal public eye, Capoeira regained popularity and became a growing part of Brazilian culture--the government even began to allow its basics to be taught in educational facilities. Today being taught in thousands of academies, schools, and universities, Capoeira has become a key aspect of the traditional Brazilian heritage. Thus, Capoeira holds the standing of the second most popular sport in Brazil. Its popularity has also begun to spread beyond the borders of Brazil and into many other countries worldwide. Its success has deemed Capoeira a respectable form of combat mixed with dance, which supplies a longstanding, rich history.

Aside from its physical aspects, present day Capoeira incorporates many elements of practical philosophy. The essence of Capoeira is experienced through the “Jogo de Capoeira,” or the game of Capoeira, more simply referred to as “jogo.” In each match, the participants exchange movements of attack and defense in a constant flow as they observe rituals and proper manners of the art. Both players attempt to control the space by confusing the opponent with feints and deceptive moves. The fighters will spin many circles and use sneaky

combinations of movements in order to confuse and deceive their opponents. These sneakily deceptive movements enchant audiences and add to the beauty of Capoeira.

During the “jogo,” the capoeiristas must find their strengths and weaknesses, while exploring their fears, fatigue, and frustration. Though challenging, these struggles are both enjoyable for the capoeiristas to and the audiences to experience. Through the dance of the “jogo,” an onlooker is allowed the extreme honor of viewing a constant process of personal expression, self-reflection, and growth.

The speed and spirit of the “jogo” are determined by the differing polyrhythms of the berimbau, a one-string musical bow, which is considered to be the primary symbol of this art form. Setting down the beats and character of the “jogo,” the berimbau is complemented and accompanied by the pandeiro (tambourine), atabaque (single-headed standing drum), agogo (double bell), and reco-reco (grooved segment of bamboo scraped with a stick) to form a distinctive ensemble of instruments. This distinct sound incorporates solos and collective singing in a call-and-response dialogue and joins the hypnotic percussion to complete the musical ambiance for the Capoeira session. The session is called “roda de Capoeira,” literally “Capoeira wheel,” or simply “roda.” The term “roda,” refers to the ring of participants that defines the physical space for the two capoeiristas engaged in the ritualized combat. This is the force that fuels the beautiful art of Capoeira brought to Brazil from Africa.

Although a strong assumed connection can be seen between Capoeira and its enslaved creators, much uncertainty still surrounds the exactness of these claims. This is due to the lack of actual physical documentation. Much of what is known today was passed down through oral tradition. Because of this, Capoeira's origins are often debated. Though there are still many unanswered questions on the specifics of Capoeira's origins, it is easy to see the connection that exists between Capoeira and the slave dances which emerged in early Brazil.

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